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100 Drummond Street  
Carlton Victoria 3053  
Tel: 03 9635 5227  
Fax: 03 9635 5360  
[www.opc.org.au](http://www.opc.org.au)

The Secretary  
Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
Melbourne VIC 3002

By email: [keir.delaney@parliament.vic.gov.au](mailto:keir.delaney@parliament.vic.gov.au)

Dear Secretary,

### **Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health**

The Obesity Policy Coalition (OPC) is a partnership between Cancer Council Victoria, Diabetes Australia – Victoria, VicHealth and the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Obesity Prevention at Deakin University. The OPC is concerned about rates of overweight and obesity in Australia, particularly in children.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health. We welcome the committee's broad Terms of Reference, including to review the evidence regarding the contribution of the environment to public health and wellbeing, evaluate the current approach to environmental design and planning in Victoria and determine opportunities to influence environmental design and planning for health.

It is widely recognized that planning and the environment in which people live, work, learn, play and shop can either support or create a barrier to healthy and active living. For example, difficulties accessing healthy food, increased availability of unhealthy foods (in particular processed and fast foods) and loss of agricultural land to urban development are all factors known to contribute to the consumption of unhealthy food.<sup>1</sup> Increased reliance on motor vehicles, lack of safe, well lit and well connected walking and cycling paths and a lack of well connected public transport options are all well known contributors to inadequate levels of physical activity among children and adults.<sup>2</sup> Population growth and housing pressure, climate change and social isolation also impact upon public health and will continue to provide challenges into the future.

We would therefore like to highlight our support for the recommendations made by VicHealth in its submission to this inquiry. In particular, we agree that spatial and temporal environmental design should support health, recreation, wellbeing, safety, social interaction and a sense of community. Planning and urban design should also promote equitable access to healthy food in all communities (particularly disadvantaged

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Diabetes Australia - Victoria  
VicHealth  
WHO Collaborating Centre  
for Obesity Prevention,  
Deakin University

communities and new master planned communities), including through improved land use that promotes local food growth, providing safe and accessible transport options (including safe and well-connected walking and cycling paths), fostering economic development opportunities and ensuring a range of appropriate housing options.

We would also encourage the committee to review the evidence on the relationship between the number of fast food outlets in a neighbourhood and health outcomes in the community. There is international evidence that higher fast food outlet density may be associated with an increase risk of overweight and obesity, including among children and within disadvantaged communities.<sup>3</sup> Currently it is difficult for community members and local councils to rely on zoning restrictions and planning schemes to oppose placement of new fast food outlets. Limited grounds exist to oppose their development and concerns about overweight, obesity and chronic disease within the community are not relevant grounds for opposition. Further, councils can also be reluctant to pursue their concerns at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal given the extensive resources available to large fast food companies to fight these matters.

Environmental design and planning that promotes long-term health and wellbeing are vital components of any multi-faceted and multi-sectoral approach capable of reducing overweight and obesity and improving public health of Victorians. We therefore look forward to the committee's report on this inquiry.

Please do not hesitate to contact Nicole Antonopoulos, Legal Policy Adviser, Obesity Policy Coalition on (03) 9635 5251 if you have any queries or would like any further information.

Yours sincerely,



Todd Harper  
Executive Director  
Cancer Council Victoria



Professor Boyd Swinburn  
Coordinator  
WHO Collaborating Centre for Obesity Prevention  
Deakin University



Greg Johnson  
Chief Executive  
Diabetes Australia – Victoria  
Adjunct Professor; Deakin University



John Fitzgerald  
Acting Chief Executive Officer  
VicHealth

## References:

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- <sup>3</sup> Fraser L, Edwards K, Cade J, Clarke G. The geography of Fast Food outlets: a review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 2010. 7(5):2290-308; Li F, Harmer P, Cardinal B, Bosworth M, Johnson-Shelton D. Obesity and the Built Environment: Does the Density of Neighborhood Fast-Food Outlets Matter? *American Journal of Public Health* 2009. 23(3): 203 – 209; Fraser L & Edwards K. The association between the geography of fast food outlets and childhood obesity rates in Leeds, UK. *Health & Place* 2010. 16(6): 1124-1128; Kwate N, Yau N, Yau C, Loh J, Williams D. Inequality in obesigenic environments: fast food density in New York City. *Health & Place* 2009. 15(1): 364 – 373; Maddock J. The Relationship Between Obesity and the Prevalence of Fast Food Restaurants: State-Level Analysis. *American Journal of Health Promotion* 2004. 19(2): 137 –143.